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REVIEWS OF BOOKS

History of Wright County, Minnesota. By FRANKLYN CURTISS-WEDGE. In two volumes. (Chicago, H. C. Cooper Jr. and Company, 1915. xvi, x, 1111 p. Illustrated)

History of Renville County, Minnesota. Compiled by FRANKLYN CURTISS-WEDGE, assisted by a large corps of local contributors under the direction and supervision of HON. DARWIN S. HALL, HON. DAVID BENSON, and COL. CHARLES H. HOPKINS. In two volumes. (Chicago, H. C. Cooper Jr. and Company, 1916. xix, xiv, 1376 p. Illustrated)

History of Otter Tail County, Minnesota; Its People, Industries, and Institutions. JOHN W. MASON, editor. In two volumes. (Indianapolis, B. F. Bowen and Company, 1916. 694, 1009 p. Illustrated)

History of Nicollet and Le Sueur Counties, Minnesota; Their People, Industries, and Institutions. HON. WILLIAM G. GRESHAM, editor-in-chief. In two volumes. (Indianapolis, B. F. Bowen and Company, 1916. 544, 538 p. Illustrated)

History of Brown County, Minnesota; Its People, Industries, and Institutions. L. A. FRITSCHÉ, M.D., editor. In two volumes. (Indianapolis, B. F. Bowen and Company, 1916. 519, 568 p. Illustrated)

Compendium of History and Biography of Polk County, Minnesota. By MAJ. R. I. HOLCOMBE, historical editor, and WILLIAM H. BINGHAM, general editor. With special articles by various writers. (Minneapolis, W. H. Bingham and Company, 1916. 487 p. Illustrated)

The writing of county history appears to be a profitable commercial enterprise. But the value of local history lies not merely in the fact that it may be made the basis of a business undertaking. The material with which it deals deserves to be preserved in a permanent and carefully prepared form; for it is nothing less than the whole fascinating story of life, of development, from pioneer days to the present time, restricted, to be sure, to a comparatively small section of the state. Every phase of that life—economic, social, political, religious—has its peculiar signifi-

cance for the history of the West and of Minnesota. To write the history of the state as a whole in this way is a stupendous task, for there are eighty-six counties in Minnesota. But what a mine of information a set of carefully prepared histories of all these counties would be!

The primary motive underlying the output of county histories of this sort is, of course, commercial. To make a business success of his venture is the main problem the publisher has to solve, and, as a consequence, many features more or less open to criticism are included in the books in order to make them sell well to the people of the county. But if the writers have an adequate conception of what constitutes history, if they have had some training in the methods of historical writing, and if they do their work thoroughly and conscientiously, the resulting histories may have considerable scientific value despite the motive underlying their publication.

The present volumes give evidence of a better conception of what constitutes history, and show more care in preparation, than the average county history. "To perpetuate the story of these people [the pioneers] and to trace and record the social, religious, educational, political, and industrial progress of the community from its first inception, is the function of the local historian," declare B. F. Bowen and Company in their prefaces. To an unusual degree the *History of Otter Tail County* shows the careful use of documentary sources, many of them difficult of access. This can not be said, however, of the *History of Brown County*, just issued by this firm. H. C. Cooper Jr. and Company declare that the newspapers both of the county under study and of neighboring counties have been carefully perused, as well as county, township, village, city, and church records. In addition, the investigators have examined "hundreds of minute books" and "thousands of letters and original manuscripts." The value of this statement is lessened by the fact that it is a stereotyped phrase appearing in the forewords of several of the histories published by this company. In all fairness, however, one thing must be noted which undoubtedly makes the writing of county history difficult, and which has been responsible in part for the poor quality of the work done in this field, namely, the careless

and unsystematic way in which the local archives are kept. Classification of records, accessibility, and possibly centralization, to a certain degree, would greatly aid the local historian in his research.

The volumes under review contain 6,152 pages, of which 3,437, or considerably more than half, are devoted to biographical sketches. Some of these are similar in character to those found in county histories of the older type—very eulogistic, and well calculated to appeal both to a man's vanity and to his purse. In the *History of Polk County* the men described all appear to be well known, prominent, successful, eminent, strong, able, enterprising, progressive, frugal, and upright. In a somewhat less degree the inhabitants of Nicollet, Le Sueur, and Brown counties are showered with kindly adjectives. The estimates of the worth of the citizens of Otter Tail County are more conservative, though there is an occasional extravagant outburst. B. F. Bowen and Company disclaim responsibility for errors in this material, for "every biographical sketch in the work has been submitted to the party interested, for correction, and therefore any error of fact, if there be any, is solely due to the person for whom the sketch was prepared." In the Cooper histories the personal estimates are more moderate, and appear to have been written with discrimination. The editors have had the sketches revised and corrected by the subjects themselves, or by relatives or friends; but "all personal estimates are the work of the editors and inserted in biographies only after consultation with the various members of the staff." Eulogistic expressions in county histories are part of the publisher's stock in trade, of course, and, realizing this, one can be less severely critical of their use. The writer of these biographies should aim at moderation and accuracy, however, for these attributes add distinctly to their worth. In addition to making one familiar with a large number of residents in the county, these sketches are, in certain respects, a real historical source, though a source to be used only with care and judgment. For a study of a large group of people, sketches of this sort are of value, even though they may, in individual cases, contain inaccuracies. In investigating the sectional elements in population, in comparing immigration at various periods and in different aspects, and in other studies similar in character,

they may prove invaluable, and may furnish much intimate information not to be found in census statistics.

Of the six works under review, five are put out in two-volume form. Like most county histories, they are bulky. Those issued by the Bowen Company present the best appearance. In the quality of paper stock and binding, in illustrations, type, and other external features, these volumes leave little to be desired. While the Cooper works are not quite so attractive, yet they are, on the whole, elaborate, and well put up. The *History of Polk County*, on the other hand, is inferior in general appearance to the other volumes. Little effort has been made in all six histories to secure illustrations of real historical worth. The pictures are mainly portraits, views of public buildings, or present-day scenes, and of course these are not without some value. The *History of Polk County* has, however, a number of pictures of more definite historical interest. One is a view of the old crossing of Red Lake River, near Fisher, in 1858, made by Manton Marble, and printed in *Harper's Magazine* for January, 1861. There is also an interesting picture of a claim shanty erected in 1872, the first building in Crookston, and there are some early views of that city. The *History of Otter Tail County* has a view of Otter Tail City in 1858, and some pictures of Fergus Falls in 1871. A most noticeable defect in these histories is their lack of maps. Surely it ought to be possible in each case to print a good map of the county, showing the townships, villages, and cities that are discussed in the text in so much detail. Then, too, a map of Minnesota would not be amiss for the purpose of showing the geographical relations of the county to other counties of the state. In some of the volumes early exploration and early travels are discussed; such chapters, as well as those dealing with other phases of the history, might well be illustrated with maps. The publishers could increase the value of future histories by the inclusion of such recognized historical apparatus. All the books under review are equally deficient in this respect.

The general arrangement of material in these six histories is topical. A chronological account is given up to a certain point, rarely extending beyond the period of settlement; following this are separate chapters on such topics as military history, agricultural development, banks and banking, physicians and surgeons,

and the inevitable bench and bar. Were a chronological and connected history of a county to be given, the writer would have to exercise more discrimination as to what to include and what to omit. The Cooper histories differ from the others in the arrangement of the biographical material. The sketches, instead of being grouped together in one volume, are scattered about through both volumes in so-called "Biographical Reviews." The purpose of this arrangement is not apparent; the plan of giving a separate volume to the biographies, or of placing them at the end, is more logical than this hide-and-seek method. The Cooper histories have an index to portraits and another to biographies in the introductory pages of the first volumes. The same indexes are reprinted in the second volumes. There is no subject index. The Bowen histories contain fairly good historical and biographical indexes preceding the text in the first volumes and reprinted in the second volumes. The *History of Polk County* has a list of illustrations and an index of portraits in the front of the book, and at the end a general index, which is merely biographical, however. None of these books has an adequate general name-and-subject index, and only one has its index in the normal place at the end.

Much more attention is given to the period of exploration and to the early history of Minnesota in the histories published by the Cooper Company than in the Bowen group. In the latter, however, there is more compact information on the related history of the state. In the former histories appear lists of events during the period of exploration. The latter, on the other hand, contain a very curious chronology of Minnesota history, ranging from the expedition of Jean Nicollet to the recent discovery of discrepancies in the office of the state treasurer.

The method of production employed differs. The history of Wright County is written by Mr. Curtiss-Wedge, while that of Renville County is compiled by Mr. Curtiss-Wedge, "assisted by a large corps of local contributors." The history of Polk County has an historical and a general editor, and a large number of writers of special articles. The Bowen histories are edited by prominent local men, though most of the work, of course, is done by agents of the publishing company. The credit for writing

the *History of Otter Tail County* is given in Mr. Mason's foreword to that work to Ernest V. Schockley, Ph.D.

The chapters on geology in both the Otter Tail and Nicollet-Le Sueur histories are technical, and appear to be taken from or based upon the writings of a geologist. The account of the geology of Otter Tail County contains extracts from General Pope's report of 1850, in which a visit to the Otter Tail region is described.

A valuable feature of the *History of Otter Tail County* is the chapter summarizing the various legislative acts bearing on the county. This chapter and others, as, for example, those on the census of 1860, transportation, and churches, bear evidence of considerable research. One of the most valuable features of the book is the section devoted to reminiscences (pp. 536-694). Besides being of real historical value, some of these are extremely entertaining, particularly those of John W. Mason, the editor.

In the Nicollet-Le Sueur history a disproportionate amount of space is given to the Indian treaty of 1851. The account consists almost entirely of a compilation made by General Le Duc for his *Minnesota Year Book* for 1852, of letters written at Traverse des Sioux during the conference and printed in various contemporary newspapers. This compilation, somewhat abridged, was published in the *St. Peter Herald*, June 14-July 3, 1914, and later, with some additional material, was issued in pamphlet form by the St. Peter chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution with the title *A Brief Sketch and History of the Signing of the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux*. The letters are interesting, but a concise statement of the making of the treaty, based upon this material and other available sources, might have been more satisfactory from an historical standpoint. The account of the early settlement of Nicollet County is based largely upon Stephen R. Riggs's *Mary and I*, and upon the St. Peter newspapers of the sixties. It seems as though more might have been made of this phase of the county's history, for example, of the trading post at Traverse des Sioux established by Louis Provençal, agent of the American Fur Company. The Little Crow uprising is discussed by Dr. Asa Daniels in a chapter which is reprinted from volume 15 of the *Minnesota Historical Collections*. Chapter 17, prepared by Dr. Conrad Peterson, deals

with the Swedish-American element in Nicollet and Le Sueur counties, though merely in a general fashion. An examination of the biographical sketches shows clearly that the population of these counties is very heterogeneous in character. Of the subjects of the first one hundred sketches, for example, twenty-nine are foreign-born, forty-eight are of foreign parentage, and twenty-three of native parentage, the countries represented being Germany, Sweden, Norway, Bohemia, England, Brazil, Canada, Wales, Switzerland, Ireland, Scotland, and France. A general discussion of all the foreign elements and their influence might, therefore, have been of considerable value.

The *History of Brown County* falls far short of the standard set by its publishers in their *History of Otter Tail County*. Although the volume contains less than half as much material, they have been able, by the use of wide margins and large type, to give it the conventional bulk of a county history. The first forty pages, for instance, are made up of the same material, word for word, that occupies the first twenty-three pages of the Otter Tail history. In general, the book appears to have been put together hurriedly, with as little expenditure of effort as possible. Little thorough investigation of documentary sources is apparent, the writers preferring to keep to the beaten path. The chapter on the Indian massacre of 1862, containing 138 pages, is almost entirely a compilation of reminiscences, most of which had been printed before. The narrative opens with an extensive account of the outbreak taken from the writings of Rev. Alexander Berg-hold. This is followed by the section on the Milford massacre by Christopher Spellbrink, and by Therese Henle's account. Next comes an extract from Daniel Buck's *Indian Outbreaks*, followed by Dr. Asa W. Daniels' reminiscences, so often utilized. The chapter closes with material reprinted from the Nicollet-Le Sueur volume. In such a compilation there is naturally considerable duplication. The most valuable material in the book is found in the chapters on pioneer settlement and township organization. One looks in vain for any satisfactory discussion of the German element, which forms so large a proportion of the population of this county.

The opening sentences of the Wright and Renville histories illustrate a certain economy of effort that is apparent to a great

extent in the first chapters of these works, and, indeed, in most similar publications. "On its splendid course from Itasca to the Gulf, the mighty Mississippi passes no fairer land than that which it touches in the central part of Minnesota, where, well tilled and populous, Wright county stretches away in sightly prospects." "On its splendid course through the mighty state to which it has given its noble name, the turgid Minnesota passes no fairer land than that which it touches from Hawk Creek to Camp, where, well tilled and populous, Renville county stretches away in sightly prospects." But this is giving away the secrets of the trade! In both works are included chapters which give from the land office records the names of the original claimants of land in the various townships of the counties. An introduction to this list very properly points out its value and significance, speaking of it as "the roll of honor of those who dared the rigors of a pioneer country and started the first developments." In the first volume of the *History of Renville County* more than 120 pages are given to the Sioux outbreak, a considerable part of this material consisting of reminiscences already in print. Chapter 23, volume 2, of the *History of Wright County* contains a mass of what appears to be valuable information in regard to the townships and villages. Special chapters are: "Pioneer Boyhood," which gives the experiences of John B. Walker; "Swedish Influence," prepared with the assistance of Rev. S. Johnson; "The Catholic Church in Wright County," by Rev. Mathias Savs; "Dairying and Creameries," edited by E. G. Redman; and "County Schools," by August A. Zech. In chapter 18 eleven pages are given over to "Wright County Murder Trials," in which many gory and hair-raising details are carefully elaborated. There is little significance in including this material, but naturally some thrills must be supplied.

In the *Compendium of History and Biography of Polk County* there is an introductory chapter on its geography and geology by Warren Upham, fortunately not too technical. The following 122 pages are devoted to the history of the county. The rest of the volume, 341 pages, is biography. Special chapters to be noted are: "History of Agriculture in Polk County," "The Northwest School of Agriculture and Experiment Station," and

"The Crookston School of Agriculture," all three written by Mr. C. G. Selvig; "The Newspapers of Polk County," by W. E. McKenzie; "Crookston and Its Institutions," by James A. Cathcart; "The Schools of Polk County," by N. A. Thorson; and "The Rise and Fall of Columbia County," by Charles L. Conger. The series of historical chapters dealing with the early Indian inhabitants, the first white men in Polk County, the fur-traders, early American explorations in the Red River Valley, and the chief historic features of early times, has been written with considerable care, and there are occasional concise references to the sources used. In connection with the discussion of the first white men in Polk County, the writer gives considerable attention to the Kensington rune stone. He inclines to a belief in its genuineness, and asserts that "this opinion is firmly held by a large majority of the experts that have examined it. Those who doubt its authenticity do so on seemingly insufficient grounds." Attention is called to the report on the subject in volume 15 of the *Minnesota Historical Collections*, but no mention is made of Professor Flom's investigation, the results of which have been published by the Illinois Historical Society. Mr. Flom, as the spokesman of a committee of seven university professors, each chosen because of his philological knowledge of Old Norse, pronounced the inscription on the stone a forgery of recent manufacture.

The manner of arrangement of the contents and the coöperative method of production of these histories make impossible any sustained excellence of style. Much of the writing is perfervid and journalistic, with little attention to nicety of distinction in word-meanings. The desire to please subscribers and to do full honor to the pioneers leads to a distressingly tumid kind of writing, and to a positive scourge of triteness. But there are indications of more thorough and serious research into available sources than has heretofore obtained in publications of this sort. If superficiality can thus be eliminated, faults of style may well be condoned.

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